

# Build on ‘impressive legacy’ of U.S. church, pope urges at final Mass

NEW YORK (CNS) — Honoring the bicentennial of four U.S. archdioceses, Pope Benedict XVI praised the “solid foundations” of the American Catholic Church and said “the future of the church in America” must continue to build on that “impressive legacy.”

But in his homily for the final Mass of his April 15-20 U.S. visit, the pope also said the “impressive growth” of the U.S. church has been “not without its challenges,” comparing those challenges to the “linguistic and cultural tensions” found in the early church.

An estimated 57,000 people attended the Mass at New York’s Yankee Stadium, which marked the bicentennials of the archdioceses of New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Louisville, Ky., all created from the founding U.S. Archdiocese of Baltimore.

“In these 200 years, the face of the Catholic community in your country has changed greatly,” Pope Benedict said. “We think of the successive waves of immigrants whose traditions have so enriched the church in America.”

He also praised “the strong faith which built up the network of churches, educational, health care and social institutions which have long been the hallmark of the church in this land,” as well as “those countless fathers and mothers who passed on the faith to their children, the steady ministry of the many priests who devoted their lives to the care of souls, and the incalculable contribution made by so many men and women religious.”

But he said the bicentennial should be “more than an occasion of gratitude for graces received.”

“It is also a summons to move forward with firm resolve to use wisely the blessings of freedom, in order to build a future of hope for coming generations,” he said.

The prevailing color theme throughout the stadium was purple, gold and white; the flowers on the altar were gold and white. All of the ubiquitous stadium advertising was covered with black drapery and fabric bearing the coats of arms of the Vatican and New York Archdiocese.

Across the storied facade of the stadium, in each place where a pennant of the American League teams normally would be displayed was attached a gold cross in a purple field.

The ballpark's jumbo TV screens welcomed the crowd to Pope Benedict's pastoral visit to New York.

As part of the entertainment before Mass, a group of people walked around the ballpark's warning track, the gravel path which surrounds the playing field. They were waving long, flexible poles topped with white doves of different sizes made of paper or fabric. Others swayed in dance on the stage area holding even larger imitation doves.

The finale was the release of some two dozen real doves from underneath an area at the back of the stage. The birds exited the stadium heading west.

After the pope entered the stadium, his entourage made its way to the Yankee dugout, which the pope entered. For a brief period the crowd faced the dugout and everybody chanted "Benedetto."

Before Mass Alberto Alejandro, 23, a seminarian from the Archdiocese of Denver, told Catholic News Service, "I wanted to come see the pope, because I knew he wouldn't come see me in Denver."

Talking to a CNS reporter he ran into on the subway train heading to Yankee Stadium, he said he had attended the rally for young people and seminarians at St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers the day before.

He said was he was particularly moved at the rally when the pope said, "I pray for you every day." "When he said it, I really believed it," added Alejandro.

"This is an awesome experience. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," Bohdanna

Zazulak of Milford, Conn., told CNS outside the stadium before Mass.

She was there with her 9-month-old infant son, Bohdan, whose name means “gift from God” in Ukrainian. She is a physical therapist at Yale University Hospital. Her parents are immigrants from Kiev, Ukraine.

Zazulak was excited that her baby, who also has his own little passport and has already been to France and Canada, was seeing his first pope. “This is one more blessing in his life,” she said.

Contributing to this story were Beth Griffin and Angelo Stagnaro.